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**DECADENT TRENDS IN HEBREW LITERATURE: BIALIK,
BERDYCHEVSKI, BRENER [BRENNER].** By Hamutal Bar-Yosef.
Pp. 416. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1997.

The subject of Decadence is timely for both Israeli and American culture. The acclaimed feature film "Eyes Wide Shut" has reminded Americans of Arthur Schnitzler's Vienna and of the role Jews played in the depiction of the darkness in the lives of twentieth century urban dwellers—living in apparent light but seeking secret places in which to avoid the glare. The re-emergence of Sigmund Freud in current discourse further enlivens our interest in decadence, and three prominent museum exhibits of Freud's life have enriched that discourse. Additional attention to decadent theme and personality—and the moral contrast with the hypocrisies of mainstream social values—became prominent subjects in two movies and a wildly successful play about the life and trial of Oscar Wilde.

Israelis, for their part, are experiencing a renewed soul searching about their own cultural environment and about the role of "classic" scribes in adding unconventional themes to the canon of Hebrew fiction and poetry. Thus, Hamutal Bar-Yosef's book on Bialik, Berdyczewski, and Brenner and their relationship to decadence brings together two ostensibly disparate worlds which she links with both dexterity and first rate scholarship. Her book could be the ideal study for Israeli-American discourse—a discourse which too rarely engages intellectuals with shared concerns. (The problem of readership even for the Hebrew literate is another issue.)

Historically, of course, Wilde and the trend known as Decadence had considerable importance for Hebrew literature, and Wilde's work was translated surprisingly early within the Yishuv's translation industry.

For some readers, attention to the indulgent denizens of urban environments and the fascination with bourgeois arrangements remains a surprising little corner of the early Zionist movement which based itself on optimistic social programs and which attached itself to values which—though not "transcendent" theologically—certainly were understood to transcend (in the sense of over-ride) the pressure of quotidian life. Wilde's appearance on the Zionist scene is, on the other-hand, no more surprising than his appearance among the Colorado miners or Iowa farmers he addressed on his legendary visit to America in the early 1880s.

But Wilde-inspired "decadence" is only one perspective on this wide ranging trend of the early twentieth century. Bar Yosef describes an array of elements that found their way in one degree or another into the works of modern Hebrew's remarkable literary triad. Her four hundred plus page book peers into almost every aspect of decadence in the three writers and she traces sources of influence—its methods and its themes—challenging earlier critics to re-examine the significance of the works these three writers must have read.

Because Bialik has not usually been attached to the trend known as Decadence, Bar Yosef's chapter on Bialik would add the most to our understanding of both the oeuvre of the poet and to our expanding of definitions of this literary trend. She states at the earliest point in the book, (p. 9) that none of the Hebrew literary greats were uncritical in their embrace of decadence, and (citing her own work) she notes that aesthetic trends influence even their opponents. Familiar as the tension is for us, even the most informed or discerning reader must be titillated by the fact that "Decadence" as a movement was too ironic and cynical to foster national and social revitalization. As we know from Richard Ellman's book on Oscar

Wilde, "Decadence" was not purely an aesthetic invention, and did—in fact—invalidate the personal lives of some of its authors. Bar Yosef's tendency to mix issues of autobiography and biography with literary elements is not entirely unwarranted, therefore, even if that mix does contribute to the overly historicized understanding of the three writers and their work. Occasionally even the best critics forget that the quoting of an attitude of a literary character (Aharon in Brenner's "Bein Mayim le Mayim" comes to mind) is not meant to be attributed to either author or narrator.

Hebrew literature found a home in the atmosphere that developed from the breakdown in the old order. The index of translated literature which the Shavits published in their important *HaSifrut* article of Summer, 1983 reflects that the small emerging literary culture of Eretz Israel was somehow primed to read works by Ibsen and Chekhov, Wilde, and many others. Hardly a trend from European literature of the generation preceding escaped translation.

Bar Yosef's problematization of the label she uses is a way of clarifying the oeuvre of each author. A good example of this can be seen on p. 243 where she deals with content, then traces formal elements, and finally addresses language as she closes in on both a definition of decadence and a characterization of Berdyczewski before 1900. The occasionally difficult reading that emerges from her approach is generally justified by what one gains from her careful catalogue of romanticism, her juxtaposition of pessimism and optimism, and her meticulous qualification of the varying ways in which writers absorbed the atmosphere created by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

Bar Yosef's stated purpose is to add new understanding to the philosophical position and emotional attitudes within Hebrew literature, and at the same time to contribute greater precision to our understanding of the aesthetic principles of the trend we call "Decadence." This she achieves.

This excellent study raises one vexing question about scholarship: Is there such a thing as over-examining from specific perspectives so that a nagging length compromises the reader's interest?

Scholars will be grateful for this detail, because the book, though it appears to appeal for its discursive narrative argument, will be helpful for its many points of reference within the history of Hebrew literature. What serves it well as scholarship will be a slight impediment to a more relaxed reading experience.

Over four hundred pages are devoted to definitions of decadence in its shadings, and to detailing which aspect of each writer's oeuvre qualifies to

be labeled as decadent/optimistic/pessimistic/nihilistic/sexually licentious/non-licentious/ and which are inflected by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. She adds a similarly shaded inventory of criticism of decadence (p. 242). One is reminded of an old Mort Sahl routine in which the night club comic labeled all political figures along a multi-shaded spectrum from left to right.

At the same time we must praise the achievements of this book, and they are as noted, a consequence of this detail. Bar Yosef is able to bring her detail to bear on one of literature's serious macro-issues: when the very qualities which inspire one label in an early age, actually foster a contrary label with the perspective of time. (See p. 243, for one example of this.)

Finally, it is Bar Yosef's attention to history and to the history of criticism which points towards the enhancement of decadent themes precisely in the place, Eretz Israel, which was created to abolish an exilic decadence. (See chapter 5, especially.)

As Bar Yosef notes so importantly in her afterward:

The influence of Decadence has been absorbed into the very foundation of Modern Hebrew Literature, in spite of the spiritual and ideological opposition of most of the literary community...

The encounter of decadent pessimism with optimistic faith in the revival of the Jewish people was a major source of the tensions and the context of these three writers and in the larger literary context in general...

(Its) footprints call us to re-examine Zionism from its sources in Herzl and Nordau as anti-decadentists and the implications of this situation for the culture that developed in Eretz Israel (p. 374).

Current re-definitions of Zionism and some of the revisionist history of the Jewish nation suggest a rich role for Bar Yosef's book; America's own struggle for self-definition which includes value along with its world weary cynicism ought to draw many from both worlds into serious dialogue. I hope this book will help enrich that dialogue.

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